Journal of Teaching and Learning

Volume 2 | Issue 3 Article 5

4-1-1988

A freshman Ph.d

Eugene Kraft

A Freshman Ph.D.

by
Eugene Kraft

One day last year I happened to pass a book lying open on a desk in a library. There was a photograph of Velasquez' portrait of Innocent X on the left-hand page. I looked at all the red and thought, "I want to go swimming in that."

I didn't go swimming in it, but I enrolled in a beginning course in art history, with the intention of working toward a B.A. in the subject. The problem was, I'd look ridiculous working on a B.A. after already earning a Ph.D. in English, wouldn't I? My colleagues quickly assured me that I would. And then there was the sheer amount of work to consider. Most people get tired of going to school. I did not feel tired at this time, but after all, I would be teaching English full-time while taking the art history courses. I was teaching college English to military people, and military people are, for the most part, educationally disadvantaged. Grading fifty freshmen composition papers each week might operate adversely on one's tracing the influence of Raphael on Ingres. And I was living in Germany and teaching English on military bases; studying art history in an alien culture(s) would produce even more stress.

"I had been examining art closely for twenty years, but I never seemed to have enough saved when I left the museums."

I had been examining art closely for twenty years, but I never seemed to have enough saved when I left the museums. There was never enough that remained permanent. I can carry Henry James to Tunisia or Taiwan, but on a gray Monday morning in Frankfurt (German museums are closed on Monday), the Prado is very far away. How could I make the experience of looking at art permanent? I could talk to people about art. But people don't talk about art much, except at parties, where they talk with a lot of feeling, but no emotion: "Don't you love the Jeu de Paume. Don't you love David Hockney? Don't you hate Christo?" Looking at art

seems to most people an even more passive experience than reading books, one lending itself to superficiality even more than discussing literature does.

Would I need to teach art history? Would I need to write articles?

I hoped not, but if I took courses in art history, the completing of assignments, the studying for examinations and listening to others' views on the subject might make the transient less so. During the past year I discovered an important fact: if you want to learn a subject you have to study it. A critic (who were the critics in art history?) or a teacher might make an obvious mistake, and in putting him right I would make his permanence transient. That is, I would disprove something always held to be true. Then six months later I might find that the critic/teacher was right. That would make my permanent theory transient. (It was a long time before we realized that the shortest distance between two points was not a straight line.) Such a process would be at best enlightening, at worst, exciting.

"How closely students watch the teacher, how closely they examine his attitudes."

One thing I immediately noticed about my art history courses is how closely students watch the teacher, how closely they examine his attitudes. And students don't do this because they like him; if they dislike him they seem to do it even more. They watch the teacher, and examine his attitudes in order to get good grades. Good students realize that without A's they won't get fellowships and admissions to good graduate schools. Thus, it is necessary to decide very early in the course where a particular teacher's sympathies lie; is he strongly academic, favoring examinations that concentrate heavily on the text? In other words, does he want names, dates and summaries of someone else's thoughts? Or is he a more modern type, preferring imaginative extensions of his own or the textbook's ideas?

To put it another way: does he want the student to reproduce someone else's mind, or does he want the student to think for himself? Anyone with the slightest experience of American academic life will charge me here with the obvious. (By the way, both kinds of teachers will say they favor both approaches, combined; we call that "having it both ways.") But my point is the strength with which the students concentrate on these approaches: not on the material, but on the teacher's approach. And not just the teacher's approach: his background, his family, his clothes and what he does on Saturday night.

One of the most discouraging aspects of this attitude is the sense I had of manipulation felt and practiced by the student and (the word is not too strong) the hatred the student feels. Manipulation because the student gives the teacher what the latter wants, and hatred because the student feels that the teacher emotionally gives nothing in return. The student flatters the teacher and pretends to a docility he does not feel. Or, as a British colleague said, when I asked him what he disliked most about his graduate work in America: "The constant, day-to-day, never-ending, ass-kissing."

The students lie and the teacher believes their lies. And the lies don't end when the course ends. Teachers have to write letters of recommendation; the students may have to take another course from this particular teacher at a later date. Thus the sense of great bitterness some (many?) ex-students appear to feel about their college days. How can one lie continuously for four years and not feel dirty? Eventually the student forgets even the names of his teachers. But he receives an appeal from the alumni association in the mail, and angrily throws it away. Or he writes, "____ you" on the appeal and sends it back, anonymously. (I once did this.)

It's worse for very good students who learn easily what the teacher thinks. These students quickly convince themselves that they're not prostituting themselves, and four years of college become one single course: "Lying 100: Introduction, Theory and Practical Application."

The teacher suffers, too. He is constantly told (at least implicitly) that he is doing well, so he doesn't change his syllabus, doesn't change his examinations, becomes bored. I listened to what students said in my art history courses last year when we took breaks between sessions. Among the best students, the commonest complaint about one teacher was, "He doesn't go into the material deeply enough." The course was a survey covering many centuries. The teacher thought that since the course was introductory, a rapid covering of the periods was the best idea. The good students wanted him to talk about particular paintings in much more detail. But to the best of my knowledge--and I did a lot of research--not one student voiced this objection to the teacher.

And once about ten minutes before class began, I was sitting in the classroom behind six other students, all of them very good students, three of them former students of mine. The three who were my former students had always struck me as extremely mature, and as cordial as they were mature. I had regarded them as friends. Perhaps they were tired at this point; the semester was ending, the class began at six-thirty in the evening and they had worked at their jobs all day. At another time (I told myself), in another mood, their attitude might have been quite different. Three were in their mid-twenties, three in their thirties, and all were married, so I'm not talking about someone eighteen, who will get a new car from his parents if he makes a C. The bitterness these six students felt toward the university was enormous. The administrators have no idea of what students think; the teacher lectures superficially; the teachers are unqualified; neither administrators nor teachers care in the least about the students. The complaints went on and on. It was not that I found the complaints invalid (though I certainly found some of them so); it was the unadulterated hostility that finally made me leave the room. "We are slaves," the students were saying, in effect. "They are our masters. Therefore, we have a right to hate them."

Well, the teacher has all the power. He has every molecule of power. He gives the grade. In every art history course I took these words of Plato kept running through my mind: "Love is possible only among equals."

Students manipulate teachers not only individually, but also as a group. They don't get together in cabals, the night before class, but they do manipulate. This manipulation becomes a kind of myth, a group consciousness, working away at the teacher's professionalism. In the second-from-last class, in a course at Wiesbaden, the teacher called for the written assignments. "You told us they weren't due until the last class!" the students cried. The teacher hesitated, a look of total cynicism covering her face. "You really didn't, Jean," I said. "All right," she said disgustedly. "Turn them in next week." Later I took out my syllabus and looked at it. She was right; we were wrong. And on the next day I asked my students for <u>their</u> papers. "You said Thursday," they objected. Ah, yes.

I was never comfortable in undergraduate or graduate school, and I always resented students who were. I loved my studies, but I hated my sense of powerlessness. The comfortable students got along well with teachers, never causing trouble, and I often quoted Oscar Wilde to myself: "Show me a person who enjoys his school days and I'll show you a bore." Couldn't they see that this teacher's notes were yellowing, that he hadn't prepared a class in years? Couldn't they see that this teacher was a pompous fascist, who used literature only to flatter his own ego? Couldn't they see that the administration was a bureaucracy whose only purpose was its own survival?

Can't they see that the reason I dislike teaching them is the fact that they aren't able to do college-level work? Can't they see that they have absolutely no imaginations? Can't they see that I'm underpaid?

Maybe they can. Maybe they could. Besides learning about Velasquez last year, I learned that the fact that someone else is happy and you're not does not automatically make you morally superior. Those fellow-students of mine may have known as much about their teachers' deficiencies as I did. And that's something else I learned: occasional compromise is a small price to pay when you're teaching/studying a subject you love. A course is a process of discovery, like art is. You start to paint something you see--an old man sitting in front of a red curtain--and you find you have created something different from what you saw. You start to write an article and find you have written something different from what you thought.

I am talking about work here. The real reason I began studying art history was that I felt I was becoming stupid. I was ceasing to perceive my students as people; they had become numbers, boring numbers. I was ceasing to see administrators as people; they had conveniently become surrogates for the professors I had had in my undergraduate and graduate years. I was even losing interest in my own subject. The unthinkable had happened: I had even stopped reading poetry. I had not read a single poem up to four or five months before my first art history course began. I <u>had</u> become stupid. But under the influence of a few weeks of art history studies, I began not only <u>reading</u> poetry again, but <u>writing</u> it. During my student years my intelligence had been sharply qualified by the aggression and hostility described above. That those two qualities are absolutely antithetical to both the creation of art and the maintenance of

happiness should have occurred to me before I opened Gardner's Introduction to Art. I had stopped seeing people.

Velasquez never stopped seeing people. Every art historian I have referred to comments on Velasquez to the effect that nothing ever comes between the object and Velasquez' eyes. He may have seen the hostility and aggression in Innocent X, but he did not feel them. He painted a physically unattractive, weak, seventy-five year old man, but he surrounded the man with splendor. Innocent, whose aggression and hostility precluded him from seeing the truth, was infatuated with the portrait. He saw only the splendor. What to Velasquez was irony, even satire, to Innocent was simple realism. He gave Velasquez money; when the painter refused it, Innocent gave him a medal. Art first awakens feeling, the most important faculty; feeling awakens the intellect.

And I learned again that studying a subject you love creates its own permanence. You have it as long as you live. It lasts, like certain ideas (say, telling the truth). Maybe like my colleagues, you think that working on a B.A. after you have a Ph.D. is ridiculous; you're wrong. Maybe you think that studying Renaissance painting is fun; study Elizabethan poetry and Francis Bacon, and then study Renaissance painting.

Trust the artists, Kenneth Clark says. Politicians lie, and historians (like students and teachers?) lie when they imagine they don't. But if art lies, it doesn't last. It reaches backward and forward and then backward again. When a historian is also an artist, as Thucydides was, we read him for the art. I was taught Greek literature over twenty years ago, by an old man who was the laughingstock of the college. He was so lonely he stopped people all over the campus and bored them for hours: a figure of ridicule. But not in the classroom. He had a passion for his subject. I read Thucydides then and got a faint but intoxicating sense of what he was writing about: enough to make me want to reread him fifteen years later. I read Edith Hamilton last week, only because I had read Thucydides two decades earlier. Ozymandias, that dirty fascist, didn't last; fascism doesn't last. Shelley's poem about him did last, but not Shelley's hysterical politics. Innocent X, with his disfiguring, aggressive scowl, so reminiscent of Ozymandias', must have thought he was impressive, that he would last. Somebody was impressive, but it wasn't Innocent X. Velasquez was impressive because he painted the truth. In fact, Innocent X was a very mediocre pope, as weak as his aggression would seem to indicate. The Encyclopedia Brittanica doesn't even mention him.